

**U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border  
Security and International Law**

**RE: Hearing on USCIS Fee Increase Rule**

**Testimony of Rhadames Rivera, Vice President  
1199SEIU United Health Care Workers East**

**10:00 AM Thursday, September 20, 2007  
2141 Rayburn House Office Building**

## **Introduction**

Good morning Chairwoman, on behalf of the 1199SEIU Citizenship Program, thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee and other distinguished guests on the important topic of USCIS fee increases and the impact on the healthcare workers we serve.

The 1199SEIU Citizenship Program began in January 2001. The program is administrated by our Benefit and Pension and Training and Education Funds. The funds provide an array of innovative and comprehensive benefits including educational and training programs that are designed to accommodate the needs of the more than 300,000 union members of 1199SEIU United Health Care Workers East. We are the largest healthcare workers union in the nation, representing workers in homecare settings, hospitals, nursing homes,, pharmacies, clinics and other healthcare agencies.

Our membership reflects the diversity of immigrants to this nation -- particularly to New York City. Our members include healthcare workers from continents and countries from around the world, including the Caribbean, South America, Central America, Canada, Africa and Europe, with the majority of members who utilize the program coming from the Caribbean. The countries in the top percentile are Jamaica, Trinidad, Dominican Republic and Guyana. We are proud that our membership embodies such rich diversity and are reminded that our nation is indeed a land of immigrants.

## **Program Overview**

The benefits of U.S. citizenship are numerous. Citizenship provides our immigrant members with more opportunities and a greater feeling of belonging and a sense of security – fully integrating them into our country. Most importantly, through citizenship our members gain the right to vote and participate more fully in the democratic process. We are committed to designing programs that expand rights and empower our members, who are the healthcare workers who keep our hospitals, nursing homes, clinics and other healthcare agencies running.

The Citizenship Program has served more than 7,000 people in the process of naturalization and related benefits. Yearly our program averages more than 1,000 member participants. Through the efforts of a dedicated and competent group of professionals, applicants are offered free legal assistance and educational support. Assistance includes application preparation, reviewing and filing of the forms N-400, N-600, I-90, N-565, N-648, AR-11 and FOIA's.

The Program offers an array of different class choices for applicants to study U.S. Government and Civics while reviewing interview techniques. We have developed an academic curriculum, video and book highlighting immigrant stories.

To date our office has submitted over 6, 178 [N-400] applications. We proudly boast 4,677 persons that are naturalized U.S. citizens through the help of the program. Yet

hundreds of our applicants are at advanced stages of naturalization (awaiting interviews and oaths). We note more than 500 applications that are in backlog and waiting adjudication past USCIS established average processing time frames. Some of these applicants have not received any information although the form G-28 Notice of Appearance as Attorney or Representative was submitted along with the applications. The 1199SEIU Citizenship Program is accredited and recognized by the Board of Immigration Appeals.

### **Fee Increase Impact**

The recently imposed USCIS fee increase, effective July 30, 2007, is the biggest immigration benefit application fee increase recorded in the history of immigration fee changes. USCIS reported that the overall application and petition fees were increased an average of nearly 86%. [USCIS Press Release January 31, 2007] Most agree that the new fees are unprecedented. The fees for naturalization applications have increased five times since 1999 from (\$225 in 1999 to now \$675 including the biometrics).

Our program is currently experiencing a drop in participation during the weeks since the new fees took effect. Scheduled appointments dropped by 50 percent, during the month of August. Many members are voicing concerns as they struggle to save money for the application. In contrast, during the months leading up to the increase, we serviced double our normal capacity. Our members participated in record high numbers, in an effort to get their applications processed before the scheduled increase. We had such high numbers that we partnered with other community service providers to accommodate the increased participation in our program.

Our union members have good jobs with fair contracts negotiated that include comparable pay and comprehensive benefits. However, they voice that the new fee is a lot of money for working class people to be able to afford. Some are saving up or borrowing money so they can afford to file for citizenship. Still others -- even before the latest increase -- expressed that they were having difficulties raising the money when the fee was \$400.00. We often learn of workers using vacation pay or even tax refunds to pay for naturalization application fees.

Citizenship is a benefit that typically families often want to do together. Husbands and wives often naturalize together with their children over the age of 18. The increase makes it difficult for a working class family to simultaneously apply for citizenship. A family of three would need \$2,025 to file for U.S. citizenship together.

And Home Care and Nursing Home workers -- who provide care to some of the most vulnerable members of our society -- still earn low wages and are fighting for more equitable earnings. The high naturalization fees are especially hard for these workers.

For too many of the healthcare workers we represent, the cost for naturalization application fees is a grave economic burden and they sometimes must sacrifice basic needs in exchange for a chance to live the American dream.

## **Conclusion**

Individuals eligible to naturalize are lawful permanent residents working and paying taxes. They already contribute to the United States economy. Lawful permanent residents share the same tax responsibilities as United States citizens. Consequently, they already pay their share for the operation of government services.

We predict that the newly imposed fees will reduce the number of working-class immigrants who can obtain citizenship because they will not be able to afford it. American citizenship is a privilege and financial cost should not deter hard working, lawful, permanent residents from fully participating in this great nation.

The forms N-400, I-90, and N-600 should not be increased by the same percentage as other applications, since these forms are used to provide immigration benefits to the population of immigrants that are already permanent residents. And all of us should work together to support hard-working immigrants, like the healthcare workers who are 1199SEIU members, so that they can live the American dream just like the many generations of immigrants who came before them.

Thank you, Chairwoman Lofren for the opportunity to testify today.